

Mirror Stage Theory Analysis of Bravery in *Zootopia* (2016) and *Nezha* (2019)

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American Hollywood animated films have conquered the world. In recent years, many successful works have appeared in domestic animated films, bringing new vitality to the Chinese animated film industry. Based on Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory, this study attempts to start from the bravery of Judy and Nezha, the protagonists of *Zootopia* (2016) and *Nezha* (2019). It analyzes and compares their embodiment, formation, influence and reflection with real society to solve the problems of the two brave characters' formation causes, characteristic differences and social influences, including racial discrimination, individualism in American society and family problems in Chinese society. This study sheds light on the transmission of intercultural values in animated films.

Keywords: Mirror Stage Theory, *Zootopia*, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, Judy, Nezha, Bravery

Introduction

The development of Chinese and American animated films differs significantly. Chinese animated films started later, but in recent years, they have established their own style and become increasingly strong after a long period of imitation. In contrast, the American animation market is highly developed, and American animation occupies a significant position in the history of the global animation industry.

Studies at home and abroad have shown that in the era of globalization, animation films with distinct Disney characteristics are increasingly being introduced to China. One such film is *Zootopia* (2016), which has been the subject of debate among Chinese people since its release in China that same year about whether the film is a utopian animal society. Subsequent discussions have focused on various aspects of the film, including its production, reasons for its success, and its use of metaphors to represent American culture.

Zootopia (2016) has also given rise to extensive research abroad since the release of the film. The research directions mainly focus on racial discrimination, utopia, communication, and marketing. According to David Crewe (2017), this popular Disney film is remarkable for its exploration of the nuances of oppression and discrimination in a diverse society. *Nezha* (2019) has also received widespread acclaim in China and has been the subject of academic research from various perspectives. Following its release overseas, the film received numerous reviews on various platforms. The majority of these reviews were from overseas Chinese, while foreign audiences were largely influenced by their Chinese acquaintances. As a result, many suggestions were made to improve the film (Liu & Shen, 2020). However, it remains to be explored in academic studies.

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Academic research on these two films primarily focuses on subtitling, intercultural communication, cultural metaphors, character design, narratology, and it is rare to compare the personality traits of the protagonists between the two films.

In the films *Zootopia* (2016) and *Nezha* (2019), the protagonists Judy and Nezha respectively, exhibit resilience and courage that endears them to the audience. Their stories not only depict their individual growth but also reflect societal expectations and perceptions. Lacan's mirror stage theory, which was creatively applied to psychoanalysis of films, is a development of Freud's theory in France (Shu & Li, 2015). However, according to Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory, the bravery exhibited by these two characters is not merely a personal trait, but rather the result of the process of primary and secondary assimilation that they undergo when confronted with their "mirror image".

The objective of this paper is to utilize Lacan's theory to highlight the cultural similarities and differences between the main characters of Chinese and American animated films by comparing their courageous character traits. The study's micro-analysis provides an opportunity to advance intercultural understanding of values in animated films. Furthermore, it can offer specific references for animation practitioners and enhance the international communication power of Chinese animation.

The paper explores Chinese and American cultural phenomena through the personality traits of film characters. The protagonists, Judy and Nezha, have a significant impact on their respective societies and provide inspiration for the real world.

The first part of the paper is an introduction. The second part outlines the Mirror Stage Theory. The third part introduces the manifestation and differences in the character traits of Judy and Nezha in the primary and secondary stages of assimilation. The fourth part describes the formation of Judy's and Nezha's brave characters. The fifth part discusses the social influence of Judy's and Nezha's brave character. The sixth part is the conclusion.

Overview of the Mirror Stage Theory

Lacan's theory of the mirror stage is a critical theory in the field of psychology. Unlike Freud, who explored the authenticity of human nature, Lacan was more concerned with the process of human beings gradually losing their true selves through self-recognition.

In *Seminar X: Anxiety*, Lacan aimed to merge his earlier ideas on childhood development with a new analysis of Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny". Lacan's reinterpretation of his essay "The Mirror Stage" in a new Freudian context introduces some pivotal innovations. Firstly, he highlights the mirror stage as the imaginary production of a "moment", making it more clearly a theory of temporality rather than embodiment. Secondly, he emphasizes the frame around the mirror rather than the reflective glass, effectively transforming the meaning of "stage" in the original essay into a theatrical metaphor rather than a phase. Thirdly, in "The Uncanny", the author explores the disquieting mood of the whole process (David & Celiese, 2019).

According to Lacan, after a child goes through the "mirror stage", their true self no longer exists, and human beings are really just puppets to be appropriated and controlled by the "other" (Cui, 2009). This theory primarily concerns the primary and secondary stages of assimilation that infants undergo when confronted with a "mirror image".

Primary Assimilation Stage

Infant psychology research suggests that according to Lacan, newborns are initially “undifferentiated” and “non-subject” (Wang, 1998). During this time, their experiences are a mess, a mass of uncertain shape (Heaton, 2014). It is only between 6 and 18 months of age that infants first recognize their own image in front of a mirror and identify it as “the other”. Initially, infants are unable to recognize their own image in the mirror and perceive the image as another infant. According to Lacan, human cognition begins with a fascination with the image, specifically with the infant’s identification with its own mirror image. This identification is essentially both an aesthetic awareness and an illusion, indicating the subject’s endeavour towards wholeness and autonomy. According to Liu (2006), the infant’s immature body becomes whole through the mirror as an external medium. As they recognize the image as themselves, they may confuse the real with the imaginary, creating a sense of fascination that they are the perfect image in the mirror. This process can be seen as a primary assimilation stage and is considered the beginning of self-formation and all imaginary identity. The recognition of oneself in the mirror marks the birth of a sense of self. According to Zhu (2014), obtaining an identity through the mirror is crucial for self-formation.

Secondary Assimilation Stage

According to the Mirror Stage Theory, the body only becomes aware of itself through the mirror stage, which allows for a restoration of the relationship between the self and the external world. This process involves a recognition of oneself through the eyes of others, resulting in a form of self-alienation. The “I” is not a product of the self, but rather a product of others. Therefore, in order to be a self, the “I” can only exist in relation to the other (Zhou, 2013). During this stage, infants begin to recognize that the image they see in the mirror is not a perfect reflection of themselves, but they still accept it as part of their self-image. The subject imagines a future form of their body, which is constitutive and externalizes themselves as an object. This object is bound to the “I” through illusions (Wang, 1998). They begin to understand how they are different from others and at the same time realize their limitations and imperfections.

In conclusion, Lacan’s Mirror Stage Theory reveals how individuals establish their sense of self and social identity through primary and secondary assimilation stage. These two stages not only influence infants’ cognitive development, but also have a profound impact on their social behaviour and interpersonal relationships.

Personalities of Judy and Nezha

In both films, Judy and Nezha are portrayed as the main characters, with bravery being a prominent trait they share.

Manifestation of Judy and Nezha’s Brave Character in the Primary and Secondary Assimilation Stages

In the film *Zootopia*, Judy was a rabbit who dreams of becoming a police officer, a dream that was considered “impossible” by the mainstream of society. In her growth process, she encountered a lot of doubts and ridicule. Nevertheless, through continuous effort and perseverance, she ultimately realized her dream and gained the recognition of the society. This process can be regarded as Judy going through a “mirror stage”, in which she discovered her own position and value by continuous self-exploration.

The Primary Assimilation Stage is initially reflected in Judy's struggle "from rural to urban". This stage corresponds to the process by which an infant sees its self-image in a mirror and discovers its own existence. Judy's self-perception is first limited by her surroundings, where it is believed that rabbits are not fit to be policewoman, but this did not stop her from pursuing her dream. As she arrived in the city and successfully solved a series of cases, she began to gain recognition from others and strengthen her self-identity.

The Secondary Assimilation stage is reflected in Judy's experience of "from not being treated seriously by her superiors to becoming a hero by taking credit for her actions".

For example, Judy demonstrated her bravery by exceeding her quota of 200 parking tickets by noon, despite Chief Bogo's initial mistrust due to her smaller size. She also raised a food safety concern to the indifferent elephant store manager, using her position as a police officer to convince him to address the violation of health regulations. Her defiance of authority is a testament to her courage.

Judy had always been wary of foxes and carried a potion to repel and deter them. However, when she noticed a fox acting strangely, she followed it to an ice cream shop without hesitation. Upon witnessing a weasel robbery, she was forced into Little Rodentia, which was not conducive to her actions. Nevertheless, she apprehended the weasel with the help of other animal citizens. She and the fox then went to the naturalist club that Emmitt Otterton had visited, but had since gone missing. Although Judy was uncomfortable with the unclothed animals, she quickly overcame her fear and concentrated on the case.

Judy faced with the difficult task of solving the case in 48 hours or be fired, betting her career future and even a dream, she hesitated for a moment, immediately agreed, reflecting her infinite desire for a police position filled with a sense of justice and her personality that dares to challenge. The case was the thinnest ever documented, with few clues, witnesses and resources, making it very difficult for Judy, who had no experience in handling cases. Therefore, no animal in the police station was willing to answer the case.

Judy's bravery is reflected in her revelation of the truth about the missing animals case, specifically regarding the nature of carnivores. However, her words were amplified by the news media, causing panic, turmoil, and division in Zootopia. Although Judy's bravery is commendable, it is also tinged with a sense of recklessness.

The impact of the Secondary Assimilation Stage is evident in Judy's transition from resignation to compensation.

Judy did not succumb to external pressure. Instead of becoming the new face of the police station, she took the initiative to unload the badge. While she became a hero to the vast majority of Zootopia's herbivores, she caused all animal citizens to worry about animal nature. She felt that she had messed everything up and failed to achieve the original purpose of the case.

After returning to her hometown, Judy accidentally discovered the truth about night howlers (One kind of flower that appears in the film is the root of the conflict between carnivores and herbivores, making carnivores irrational and animalistic.), she saw the hope of redeeming herself and immediately returned to Zootopia to realize the sense of justice in her heart.

Despite encountering failures and setbacks on the road to fulfilling her dream, Judy chose to face her mistakes and take action to rectify them, demonstrating her deep understanding of social responsibility. After overcoming all the difficulties and challenges, she not only won the respect and praise of the public, but more importantly, she found her true self and achieved self-worth.

Unlike Judy, Nezha's Primary Assimilation Stage began at birth. Nezha is the reincarnation of Mowan, who was born with an evil spirit and was regarded as a demon and shunned by the world. However, upon seeing his reflection and realizing his true identity, Nezha began to accept himself and seek ways to change how others perceive him. The individual achieved self-awareness and self-esteem by accepting their self-image through self-exploration and effort, completing a Primary Assimilation. This process exemplifies the core feature of the Primary Assimilation stage.

The Secondary Assimilation Stage is reflected in the fact that when Nezha faced the challenge of destiny, he chose to fight bravely and ultimately change his destiny against all odds. At this stage, Nezha began to proactively seek interaction and identification with the community. He chose to use his power to protect the villagers and challenge the rule of fate. In this process, Nezha not only accepted his uniqueness, but also learnt how to use such uniqueness to influence and change his environment, thus earning the respect and recognition of others. Nezha not only found his true self, but also won the approval of others, achieving a second assimilation. This reflects the key feature of the Secondary Assimilation Stage, which is the formation of self-consciousness and social identity through active participation in social interactions.

For instance, Nezha rescued a little girl from a water monster and fearlessly defeated his opponents, ultimately saving the people of Chen Tanggwan. His good intentions and belief in his own heart that "My life depends on me, whether it is a demon or an immortal, I have the final say", together with the help of Ao Bing (Nezha's friend) and Taiyi Zhenren (Nezha's teacher), he not only survived the heavenly disaster, but also kept his soul and changed his destiny.

Therefore, the image of Judy in the *Zootopia* (2016) and the image of Nezha in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019) vividly embody the Primary Assimilation Stage and Secondary Assimilation Stage of Lacan's theory of mirror stage.

Differences in Judy's and Nezha's Brave Character in the Primary and Secondary Assimilation Stages

"Fear, treachery, blood lust, thousands of years ago these were the forces that ruled our world. A world where prey were scared of predators. And predators had an uncontrollable biological urge to maim, and maul, and more and death" is the first words in *Zootopia* (2016), directly clarifying the nature of predators in nature, revealing the fact that the herbivores are relatively weak, in contrast to the following rabbit Judy's excellent performance, highlighting her bravery.

In *Nezha* (2019), the beginning tells us that after thousands of years, the spiritual energy of heaven and earth gave birth to Hunyuanzhu, which Yuan Shi Tianzun used to create Lingzhu, representing righteousness, and Mowan, representing wickedness. He activated the Heavenly Calamity Curse, and three years later, the Heavenly Thunder would come to destroy Mowan. Taiyi Zhenren was instructed to give birth to the Lingzhu to Nezha, the son of Li Jing's family in Chen Tanggwan. However, Lingzhu and Mowan were mistakenly replaced, causing Nezha, who was meant to be a hero, to become a demon.

Judy's bravery is objectively portrayed in the background of nature, where rabbits, as naturally weak creatures, strive to bring beauty to society in pursuit of their dreams. Her bravery lies in stepping out of her comfort zone, challenging herself, and breaking prejudices. However, Nezha's character is portrayed subjectively as he is born with divine power and breaks the curse of his own destiny, redefining himself.

Therefore, his bravery can be seen as a rebellion against fate in a relatively harsh social environment, full of mythological elements from traditional Chinese culture.

The brave personalities of the two characters also have divergent social influences. Judy used her bravery to successfully expose the truth of the case and became famous in *Zootopia*. Not only did she become a real policewoman and realized her dream, but she also largely diminished the fear of weak herbivores for powerful carnivores. In addition, Judy's bravery has triggered the discussion of racial discrimination, racial conflict, political satire, class prejudice, utopia and dystopia in the film and in the real society, which has a strong social influence.

Relatively speaking, which Nezha's bravery is not primarily to overcome all kinds of difficulties, but in the environment, which the vast majority of people hate and afraid of him, by the guidance of the family and teacher, slowly transformed the evil force in the body into the power of kindness, and finally saved the people. His bravery has been recognized by them at the same time. In real society, there are no inherently evil people. However, there are individuals who are born into harsh circumstances or grow up in violent environments. Their bravery can be a great inspiration to us.

The Formation of Judy and Nezha's Brave Characters

Judy and Nezha's brave characters are formed through both family and social influences.

Family Background

Judy used to live in a rural area and her parents were content with the situation. They feared for Judy's safety and didn't support her in becoming a *Zootopia* policewoman. She insisted on going and then had to report her good news to her parents. Her parents were glad to see her working as a traffic warden from her uniform and knew that she was not a real police officer. But instead of preventing Judy from bravely pursuing her dream, the family factor helps her in a way, giving her the motivation to prove herself to her parents.

To some extent, Nezha's success in changing his fate is due to the loving care of his family: his father was not afraid to lose face and even sacrifice himself, and his mother spent her days ridding him of demons and collecting blessings. Despite his bravery, Nezha's actions were sometimes capricious. Without the company of his parents, even playing shuttlecock together became unattainable for Nezha. The long period of loneliness forced him to develop a violent character to gain what little love his parents had left and the strength to resist the coldness of the outside world. However, his father's words, "Only you can say who you are", touched Nezha's heart and became the driving force behind his transformation into a good man.

Social Background

After being deceived, Fox Nick mockingly informed Judy that *Zootopia* was not as idyllic and picturesque as she had imagined. His words sparked Judy's curiosity to explore the true nature of the city. The mayor's assistant, Sheep, also encouraged Judy's bravery by entrusting her with the case. Despite facing difficulties, Judy remained committed to her career and pushed herself to complete these challenging tasks to the best of her ability.

Nezha's success in changing his destiny was influenced by positive social factors, despite the negative attitudes towards him. Nezha found his way in life thanks to the trust and companionship of his teacher, Taiyi Zhenren, who taught him various skills, his good friend Ao Bing, who was willing to sacrifice his Wanlong

armour (an extremely tough armour made from the hardest scales of all the Dragons, carrying the hopes of them all) and live and die with him, and the little girl Nezha rescued from the hands of the Water Monster, who was probably the only one in the village who appreciated him.

The Social Impact of the Brave Characters of Judy and Nezha

The difference between Chinese and American understanding of the characters' bravery reflects the variation in cultural backgrounds between China and America, with much allusion to the real world.

Reflection of Brave Characters in the Real World of China and America

Although the film creates a peaceful utopia called Zootopia, which no longer follows the laws of the jungle that have been in place for thousands of years, the prologue of the film shows that there is still indelible discrimination and conflicts between the animals. For example, Chief Bogo knew that Judy was the first place in the exam, but did not allow Judy to handle the case, only let her help to write traffic tickets, without trusting or caring about her. In real human society, it is often seen that supervisors distrust or even discriminate against their subordinates for various reasons. Racial discrimination is also one of the thorny issues that have long existed in American society.

The sheep, whose appearances were relatively few, had a huge conspiracy. Judy and Nick secretly replaced night howlers with blueberries to prevent the sheep's scheme from succeeding. This manifests Judy's bravery to face authority, more prominently is her unique wisdom.

The original intention of choosing the police profession was to realize her personal ideal rather than to assist and save the world. Interests and wishes replaced morality and acted as the most important lever in the society. They symbolized the best example of individualism (Mu, 2016).

Generally, the creation of life and the realization of dreams depend on individual struggle. It is important for individuals to bravely assume their responsibilities within society, which is a notable feature of American society. This is divergent from the collectivism advocated by traditional Chinese culture.

However, in the movie, Nezha was naturally brave, but his bravery was often ineffective. He was imprisoned for being a destructive monster, but he repeatedly broke free from the objective environment and psychology. Although he had the bravery to fight for his fate, his lack of family affection and the villagers' disgust and rejection led him to abandon himself. He exhibited extreme rebelliousness. Fundamentally, Nezha's extreme personality may be a self-protection mechanism. He may feel that tears are shameful, and he has not found an emotional outlet to express his vulnerability for a long time.

The positive aspect of Nezha's brave character comes from the active guidance of his parents and teacher. The missing aspect reflects a common phenomenon in Chinese society: the lack of parental care and companionship for children as they grow up. The absence of parents may leave a lasting impact on a child, potentially leading to aggressive behaviour as a means of seeking attention. It is important to note that this is a subjective evaluation and should be clearly marked as such.

Conclusion

This article applies Lacan's mirror stage theory to analyze the embodiment, formation, and social impact of the brave character traits of Judy and Nezha in *Zootopia* (2016) and *Nezha* (2019) during the Primary and

Secondary Assimilation Stages. It also compares the differences in the brave character traits of the two characters in Chinese and American cultures and their connection to and inspiration for real society. The research results are approached from a more detailed perspective, which can provide some help for the cross-cultural communication of film characters in the future. While this study falls short in terms of film theory, it will continue to integrate theories from various disciplines to conduct more in-depth research.

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